Inscriptions

– contemporary thinking on art, philosophy and psycho-analysis –
https://inscriptions.tankebanen.no/

**Title:** Review of *Uncertain Times* by Jacques Rancière

**Author:** Dimitar Ganov

**Section:** Reviews

**Abstract:** Review of *Uncertain Times* by Jacques Rancière (Polity, 2024). 200 pp. Translated by Andrew Brown. Softbound. ISBN: 978-1-509-55868-1.

**Keywords:** bookreview; consensus; political ontology; democracy; capitalism

**Received:** 20 October, 2024.

**Accepted:** 1 November, 2024.

**Published:** 15 January, 2025.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

# Review of *Uncertain Times* by Jacques Rancière

Review of *Uncertain Times* by Jacques Rancière (Polity, 2024). 200 pp. Translated by Andrew Brown. Softbound. ISBN: 978-1-509-55868-1.

*Uncertain Times,* published by *Polity* (2024) is the English translation of Jacques Rancière's book *Les trentes inglorieuses: Scènes politiques* (2022), which includes previously published articles along with conference reports and interviews conducted in 2010-2021. The book is a generalization of the author's work on political ontology, developed in the context of recent resistance actions in France against a dominated world which follow the logic of equality. Analyzing the identity of the left from this perspective, Rancière emphasizes the construction of the different dimensions of the concept of "people."

In the book the author, for the first time, builds a comprehensive concept of "state racism." (p. 3) "State power" and "global financial power" (p. 60) create "the people" through the "logic of inequality." (p. 47) Claiming to combat far-right racism through the universalism of citizenship, the state crafts anti-immigrant laws and practices based on the foreign origins of even those born on French soil, constructing a "sub-French people." (p. 5) It is "state racism" that creates such xenophobic practices and attitudes, attributing them to the ignorant and unreasonable "people"; the production of the two ideological images gives rise to antagonism between real social groups and diverts the resistance potential of society in a direction integrated in the "logic of consensus." (p. ix) The universalist idea of "equality" before the law serves as a reason, for instance, to criminalize the burqa. The construction of the "people" according to the "logic of inequality" feeds various ideas about the superiority of a certain collective identity over another. A particularly apt example is the approach of Trump, who creates his "people", relying "not on the feeling of an inequality to be repaired but on the privileges to be maintained against all those who would like to attack them." (p. 46)

Rancière's views on the construction of a political community have always been relatively close to Ernesto Laclau's concept of the "constitutive outside", as well as the fundamental understanding that the "people" is not the "substantial reality of a group of men and women. It is the result of a symbolic construction of the community." (p. 122) In *Uncertain Times*, Rancière pays particular attention to developing the thesis of the antagonism between representation and democracy. For him, representation historically has always been "…not that the many govern through the few. It is that the many are governed by the few who are able to do so because they represent not the population but the general interests and fundamental values of society," (p. 123) and the dominant class permanently reproduces itself, choosing its own representatives, recruiting them among themselves and offering them to electorate.

The false symbiosis between democracy and representation in modern politics is based on the logic of inequality, while Rancière's concept of democracy in *La Mésentente* (*Dissensus*) is that politics begins with the metonymic claim of "people" who have nothing other than their "own share" in society which, as such, represents equality. Therefore, he appropriates the name of the whole community ("demos"), consisting of equals.

The "people" and equality are constructed at the moment this event occurs. By declaring that "demos" is part of society just like the rich, the "demos" brings equality to society and creates a political community in which equality and inequality, justice and injustice, confront each other.

For Laclau, populism is a seemingly quite analogous process, understood precisely as a synonym of politics and defined as a request of particularity to be the whole, but this process is identical with the claim of universal representation. For Rancière, the "people" does not represent the whole, but creates it, gives rise to the two antagonistic worlds: equality and inequality. Representation is based on the demand for consensus which is not the result of debate. This however is impossible, because there is only one possible choice: "the offensive of absolute capitalism." (p. 105) The democratic singularity is the result of dissensus, or the moment of intrusion of "the people" into the pre-political community.

According to the author, the moments that disrupt the enduring time of the established dominant order create democracy's own time, the fleeting time of rebellion. The occupation of the streets and iconic public places changes the purpose of the space; it is no longer "… a space defined within the distribution of economic and social activities" but is instead "space outside" (p. 101) in which there are no barricades and no demands are raised. Authority is ignored, the "occupiers" communicate not with it, but with each other, and everyone gets the opportunity to speak publicly and realize a potential that they did not realize in their everyday life. Everyone, not just an "elite" , is qualified and authorized to engage in politics as was the case with the *Gliet Jaunes*. Rancière also emphasizes the ambiguity of revolts, insofar as in the assemblies of the "occupied" places, togetherness is increasingly based on an aspiration to consensus: "It can be said that the consensus among the participants is one thing, the dissensual aspect of their practice with respect to the normal order of things another." (p. 103) Spontaneity and evanescence also meant that the revolts are always in the middle of the road, because after the collapse of state socialism there is no pre-defined goal for left movements Nevertheless it is precisely a democracy precisely the "people" constructed by it in struggle with representation are not pre-existed, "substantialized people." (p. 128)

It is in the context of his constructivist conception of history that Rancière unequivocally rejects the deterministic Marxist view of the doom of capitalism to ruination and observes that history does not work for political causes, but after the collapse of the old collective forms of labor and organized resistance, the left must discover new forms of struggle itself. As a communist distanced from Marxism, Rancière tended to simplify Marxists views about history. Historical materialism does not imply that the proletariat will destroy capitalism automatically when the time comes. For Rancière, the collapse of state socialism proved that the death of capitalism is not predetermined: within the framework of political ontology, this is a consistent position, but for historical materialism, this is only the fate of a historical phenomenon.

The author rejects the sociological vision of social development which he also claims coincides with the Marxist paradigm, according to which "social actors do not know what they're doing." (p. 36) Workers are "duped" by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology and do not understand their class interest, and the implication is that only the intelligentsia can form true class consciousness. According to Rancière, the democratic "people" is constructed precisely by means of the opportunity for everyone to state and implement their wishes and views, without possessing the professional abilities and erudition that the dominant class ascribes

to itself in order to justify its dictate. And when the state authority is faced with unforeseen cases like the pandemic, it legitimizes its decisions by means of the "ideology of science," but makes decisions based on the "logic of inequality" that has followed it until now. The lockdown and home office were imposed not because of the requirements of scientific knowledge but due to the lack of an alternative because of tendency to limit social spending including for health care. According to the "sociological vision," the reasons for May 1968 are the disintegration of the traditional community, individualism and the desire of the students to "overcompensate" loneliness by means of their "imaginary" revolution, because (according to Raymond Aron) they lacked an "intermediate body" that could explain to them the new complex realities. For Rancière, it is their inconsistency and reliance on an "intermediate body" in the form of the Parti communiste français (PCF) which fatally limits their subversive capacity. Any creation of a democratic "people" owes its singularity to its anti-institutionality and detachment from established times and spaces.

There are also problematic elements in the book. In his constructivist ontology, Rancière naturally does not allow any teleology, but he is inclined to another type of determinism. Although he is aware of the limited potential of the resistances to the "consensus", he defines any mass unrest as dissent as if by default, i.e. the ontic is transformed into the ontological but not always with sufficient arguments. In fact, for example, changing the purpose of public spaces may not follow the "logic of equality" in the construction of "the people" at all, and is itself merely a potential condition to realize what Rancière claims it represents. This, however, does not make the author's analysis any less interesting. Rancière is right that Agamben's interpretation of the pandemic – the establishment of a "state of exception", which allegedly existed also before Covid – is unable to discover the uniqueness of the event; but Racnière probably underestimates the possibilities of the digital age, used precisely during the pandemic not just for control, but also for a certain monopolization of the influence of the state on "locked" individuals, especially through distance learning. But despite all this, Jacques Rancière's book manages to develop his philosophical concept on the basis of an apparent publicism; that is in accordance with a popular reading of his philosophy.

*Dimitar Ganov*[1]

---

Copyright © 2025 Ganov.

**Correspondence:** Dimitar Ganov, email: abutor1@gmail.com.

**Received:** 20 October, 2024.

**Accepted:** 1 November, 2024.

**Financial statement:** The scholarship for this article was conducted at the author's own expense.

**Competing interests:** The author has declared no competing interests.

**How to cite:** Ganov, Dimitar. Review of *Uncertain Times* by Jacques Rancière. *Inscriptions* 8, no. 1 (January 2025): 98–100. https://doi.org/10.59391/inscriptions.v8i1.284.

[1] Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Science (orcid.org/0000-0003-1668-6599).